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ASSESSING THE LEGACY OF THAT THING THAT HAPPENED AFTER POSTSTRUCTURALISM

LEXICON, PHILOFICTION FEMINISM, NON-LARUELLE, NON-PHILOSOPHY, POST-STRUCTURALISM, QUEER

Now that the SR/000 wave has crested, crashed, and receded, we can start to evaluate it with the advantage of perspective. I won't attempt to offer an autopsy here, but I do want to address a few points and then offer a prediction for the future. I'll refer to some details about SR/000, but I also want to consider it more broadly as symptomatic of the new ontological turn or "that thing that happened after poststructuralism." In other words, while some of the specific issues within SR/000 are important, I think that the advent of SR/000 is most useful for marking an historical boundary, even if it can't explain the larger state of theory and philosophy today.

The first general point, one that I already made a few years ago, is that *what began as realism has ended as materialism*. We've seen this happen with the "new ontology": what began with an interest in philosophical realism by post-Deleuzians like Manuel Delanda, has reorganized itself into a distinctly materialist discourse. Jane Bennett's 2009 book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* was instrumental in galvanizing this broad trend. But one might also cite any number of other contributions from the likes of Elizabeth Grosz, Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, or Arjun Appadurai.

After an initial burst of interest, many readers have come to realize that philosophical realism is, in fact, a narrow topic, of interest primary to professional philosophers. *Did the world exist prior to humanity's conception of it? If a tree falls alone in the forest, does it make a sound?* It turns out such questions are rather pedantic if not a bit frivolous. Part of the problem is that speculative realism was always a rather small clique centered around a group of white, Euro-American philosophy dudes. New materialism, by contrast, has proven to be a space much more amenable for work in a broader spectrum of fields, whether they be media studies, aesthetics, queer theory, feminism, or something else entirely.

The reasons for this are many, some of them substantive, some of them demographic. Philosophy, for instance, can be an intensely gynophobic discipline. And at the same time fields like the ones I just mentioned already have a long track record of materialist exploration. For certain authors — here I'm thinking of someone like Luce Irigaray — the notion that ontological speculation is a necessary antidote to poststructuralism, a claim often repeated in SR circles, is itself a canard. For others, the waning of poststructuralism and the concomitant appearance of speculative realism after the turn of the millennium felt less like a departure and more like a return to what they already knew best. My home field of media studies, for example, already decamped several years ago from culturalist semiotics to a more durable, archival and material approach, by way of Friedrich Kittler and New German Media theory; cinema studies did something similar even earlier during the 1980s. The arrival of speculative realism in 2007 no doubt focused some of these issues and gave them a newfound philosophical clarity, but at the same time it began to impose a new set of limitations. In contrast to philosophical realism, materialism has never limited itself to the particular philosophical question as to the realness of the external world or our ability to gain knowledge of such a world. Materialism has long had a keen interest in the external world, of course, but only in as much as that world can be understood as a social, cultural, and political world. So I suspect this trend will continue: from realism back to materialism.

A related point, one that's a bit more zoomed in. After the end of poststructuralism and the subsequent reorganization of knowledge that has taken place in recent years, two new factions have emerged. First are the *Reticular Empiricists* formed mostly by followers of Deleuze (along with Whitehead as well), and flanked by a formidable army of Latourians. Here we find the process philosophers and affect theorists, including a number of interesting authors like Isabelle Stengers, Brian Massumi, and Steven Shaviro. I would classify several of the new materialists here as well, particularly those Carl Sagan Deleuzians who offer their reflections on slime mold or quantum weirdness. And some of the people affiliated with SR/000, but certainly not all, are Reticular Empiricists of one kind or another.

Second are the *Generic Communists* assembled from the newly revitalized remains of Marxist theory. The great champion here is

Badiou. But also Zizek, and those in Negri's circle. I'm thinking also of people like Peter Hallward, Bruno Bosteels, Alberto Toscano, Jodi Dean, McKenzie Wark, Jason Smith, and Benjamin Noys. The anarchists and communization theory folks are here too, Tiqqun, Invisible Committee, Endnotes. And, despite a number of nontrivial discrepancies, I would also put Laruelle here. In my reading Laruelle is essentially an Althusserian Marxist, albeit one mixed with healthy doses of gnosticism and mysticism. He has a theory of generic communism that rivals even that of Badiou.

You've no doubt noticed the lack of diversity in these two rosters. It's always difficult and dangerous to generalize about intellectual movements, since they tend to be more messy and unclassifiable than their chroniclers would have you believe. But, for its part, SR/OOO is certainly one of the whitest intellectual movements we've seen in a long time. I mentioned this phenomenon in an article a few years ago and also briefly at the end of *Interface Effect*, predicting that a side-effect of speculative realism would be a re-marginalization of voices of color. I was promptly pilloried for saying so. But the fact remains: continental philosophy and theory were a much more integrated place ten or twenty years ago; now they have effectively re-segregated themselves into distinct zones, with scholars of color gravitating toward certain topics, even as they are forced to "mainstream" their work by depoliticizing it or face marginalization within the academy (much of which, I'll also note, is due to persistent institutional pressure to sideline, de-fund, or even eliminate these kinds of intellectual interventions). Thus, while critical race theory has in some ways never been more active and vital as it is today, as evidenced by the important new work of people like Achille Mbembe, Sara Ahmed, Jasbir Puar, Alexander Weheliye, Kara Keeling, Fred Moten, Frank Wilderson and many others, such work has flourished almost entirely independently from the conversations and debates happening in SR/OOO circles. (Although I've heard rumors of, ahem, an axis of evil forming between non-philosophy and afro-pessimism and am certainly trying to encourage it as best I can. More news as it unfolds.)

As for the Reticular Empiricists and the Generic Communists, historically I've been drawn to both camps, in different amounts and for different reasons. Deleuze has been one of the single most important figures to me. But for a number of reasons I've recently turned my attention away from the Reticular Empiricist camp. I've already outlined this change in print and here on the blog. But the gist of it has to do with critique and the role of intellectual work. In essence I view Deleuzianism today — mind you, Deleuzianism broadly conceived — as a dominant ideology that structures the norms and conventions of many aspects of society and culture, including technical infrastructure, subject formation, and particularly how we understand social and political organization. Thus to the extent that intellectual work is meant to challenge existing norms, I feel it imperative that we challenge this particular Deleuzian dominant. For the immediate future, then, I'm more interested in figures like Badiou or Laruelle — along with a continued interest in afro-pessimism and queer theory's critique of affirmationism and futurity — as a way to actively oppose the Deleuze camp. And, to the extent that Laruelle is a speculative realist par excellence (more on that in a sec), this will also be a way to challenge the assumptions of mainline SR from within.

These are some general points dealing with the wake of the new ontological turn. Now to a more specific point, one that highlights a weakness of SR/OOO overall. The specific point is that this philosophical school seems to have *an impoverished if not naïve grasp of relationships*, particularly the relationship between thinking and being. Indeed, this is precisely the point. Representation and interpretation were in the crosshairs from the outset, with Meillassoux's critique of correlationism specifically targeting thinking's interpretive relationship toward being. As a result, the field has produced two basic approaches to relation, those who prioritize and fetishize relation to such a degree that it loses much of its meaning (in particular, followers of Deleuze, Whitehead, or Latour), and those who marginalize relation in favor of some other overarching concept (contingency for Meillassoux, or the One for Laruelle).

For instance, relationships are very important for Latour, but they are rather blandly described by him in terms of logistics and infrastructural churn. For Latour, things connect and change as a result of translation or negotiation. The result is a kind of Hobbesian landscape in which relations are, ironically, merely the outcome of the socio-physical laws that preexist them and determine them. We could say something similar about Deleuze and Deleuzianism today. Deleuze is nothing if not a philosopher of relation, yet Deleuze physicalizes relation in such a way that, again ironically, reduces relation to that of thermodynamic exchanges, chemical reactions, metallurgical annealing, and so on. Deleuze doesn't do metaphysics so much as physics. Likewise Laruelle has taken a rather extreme stance on relationships, *an outright ban!* I exaggerate, but it's almost true. While philosophy is chock-full of relation according to Laruelle, so much so that the two terms are almost synonymous, non-philosophy by contrast has essentially one single concept of relation, that of the unilateral determinism of the One (toward which there is no reciprocal relation). In other words, if you seek a complex and nuanced theory of relation, you won't find it in Laruelle. Not that that's a bad thing. In fact I view Laruelle's theory of relation as superior precisely because it is neither complex nor nuanced. But that's another story for another day.

A final point — or rather prediction — is to prognosticate about the reception of Laruelle. Thus far Laruelle has not been branded a speculative realist. In fact it's been something of a blessing, because it has served to buffer him from the kind of boom-bust cycle that accompanies intellectual fads. From one perspective it's surprising that he hasn't been called a speculative realist, given the natural affinities between Laruelle's project and SR, and given that one of the participants in the original 2007 conference on speculative realism, Ray Brassier, is largely responsible for introducing Laruelle to the English speaking world. Brassier was still closely affiliated with the work of Laruelle at the time of the SR conference, although he's since moved on to different topics. Still, from another perspective it's not so surprising. Brassier very publicly (and wisely) removed himself from

the SR brand, and some of the most visible figures in SR, such as Quentin Meillassoux, have distanced themselves from Laruelle or otherwise declined to engage with him.

Even with all that in mind I predict that, in the future, *Laruelle will be contextualized as a mainline speculative realist*. The reasons for this are simple. Given several points on which speculative realism has defined itself, Laruelle either meets or exceeds the mark. Take the most important point, correlationism. It's Meillassoux's terminology, and Laruelle doesn't use the word. But the substance of Laruelle's project is indeed that of a withdrawal from correlationism. And, as I've argued before, Laruelle not only withdraws from correlationism more definitively than Meillassoux, he finalized the details of such a maneuver ten to twenty years prior to Meillassoux's arrival on the scene.

Or take another point: realism. The meaning of the term realism has long been the subject of intense debate, and in my writings on Laruelle I prefer to label him a materialist for idiosyncratic reasons that I won't dwell on here. But at the most general level it's hard to deny that Laruelle has a theory of the real. He frequently uses the term "Real" as a synonym for "the One," Laruelle's term for radical immanence and arguably the single most important term in his entire body of work. Further, the *reasons* that motivate Laruelle's turn to the real are identical to those cited by speculative realism: to think apart from the subject-world relation, what Meillassoux called correlation and what Laruelle simply calls "philosophy."

In sum, I think Laruelle is indeed a speculative realist on the merits, and I predict that he will be re-contextualized as such in the future, for better or worse. Note that I make such a prediction with some dismay, given SR's shortcomings mentioned here and elaborated elsewhere. Still, Laruelle has the potential to disrupt this discourse from within and transform it (for the better) by reconnecting it back to some of the domains that mainline SR often avoids: marxism and communism, ethical theory, philosophy of identity, theories of the subject. Indeed as Katerina Kolozova discusses in a recent interview, this transformation is already well underway.

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